

September 30, 2005: USCIRF cites U.S. action against religious freedom violators; Expresses concern that actions regarding Saudi Arabia come soon, and cautious optimism about measures on Eritrea, Vietnam

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 30, 2005

Contact:

Anne Johnson, Director of Communications, (202) 523-3240, ext. 27 WASHINGTON - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) welcomes the U.S. State Department's announcement of decisions on three serious religious freedom violators, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Eritrea, in fulfillment of statutory obligations outlined in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). Last year, the Department of State for the first time named these three countries "countries of particular concern," or CPCs for the severe and ongoing violations of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief perpetrated by their governments. In order that the promotion of religious freedom is a consistent part of U.S. foreign policy, IRFA requires the U.S. government to take steps in response to the CPC designation. In view of the religious freedom violations perpetrated by the government of Eritrea, the State Department has announced the "denial of commercial export to Eritrea of any defense articles and services controlled under the Arms Control Export Act," with some items excepted. On Vietnam, the Department referred to last May's conclusion of a binding agreement with the Vietnamese government to work towards improvements in religious freedom conditions in that country. With regard to Saudi Arabia, the Secretary of State authorized a 180-day waiver of action "in order to allow additional time for the continuation of discussions leading to progress on important religious freedom issues." "Though the response to the new CPC designations comes well past the deadline of March 15, the Commission welcomes the announcement of the action on Eritrea, the imposition of the first unique sanction to be taken under IRFA," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie. Despite efforts by the U.S. government to engage the government of Eritrea, the already poor religious freedom situation has deteriorated. "The imposition of export controls demonstrates the seriousness with which the United States views the violations," Cromartie said. The CPC designation of Vietnam has allowed our two countries to talk seriously about religious freedom concerns, several of which are addressed in the binding agreement. "Nevertheless," Cromartie said, "it remains to be seen if the promises made in the agreement will be met with measurable and durable improvements in the situation in Vietnam. Reports of serious violations continue." The Commission applauded the designation of Saudi Arabia as a CPC in September 2004. However, in the absence of real progress in Saudi Arabia over the past year, the Commission believes that the U.S. government should use the 180-day extension to directly engage the Saudi government to achieve demonstrable progress by the end of that period of time. In the absence of such progress to date, the Commission has made recommendations for U.S. government action in accordance with IRFA. These remain appropriate and include: order the heads of appropriate U.S. agencies, pursuant to section 405(a)(13) of IRFA, not to issue any specific licenses or grant any other specific authority for the export of any item on the U.S. Commerce Control List of dual-use items to any Saudi agency responsible for committing particularly severe violations of religious freedom; identify and render inadmissible for entry into the United States any Saudi government official who was responsible for or directly carried out religious freedom violations, as outlined in section 604 of IRFA; and issue a proclamation, under the President's authority pursuant to section 212(f) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 USC 1182(f)), to bar those Saudi government officials from entering the United States who have been responsible for propagating globally an ideology that explicitly promotes hate, intolerance, and human rights violations. The Commission notes that the Department did not invoke a national interest waiver on Saudi Arabia. This allows for more options in the future to respond to religious freedom violations. "We hope that genuine progress will be made in Saudi Arabia to justify the course of action taken by the Department, particularly in light of a senior State Department official's important public comments in Saudi Arabia this week expressing concern about intolerant literature in American mosques traced to the Saudi government and the official's call for the Saudi government to 'find room to respect people of different faiths and different faith traditions'," Cromartie said. "We also would encourage the State Department to consult with Congress and other parts of the U.S. government during its discussions with the Saudis, and to make any agreement reached with the Saudi government public in the interest of the accountability that results from transparency." The Commission urges the U.S. government to see the responses announced last week only as the first steps in a long-term process of focused diplomatic activity on behalf of freedom of religion or belief in Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, and Vietnam. Until the governments of these countries respond by ending severe violations, CPC status for all three should be maintained.

Michael Cromartie, Chair

- Felice D. Gaer, Vice Chair Nina Shea, Vice Chair Preeta D. Bansal Archbishop Charles J. Chaput Khaled Abou El Fadl Richard D. Land Elizabeth H. Prodromou Bishop Ricardo Ramirez Ambassador John V. Hanford III, Ex-Officio Joseph R. Crapa, Executive Director